

Soviets must stop bullying Lithuania

A half-century ago, an infamous Nazi named von Ribbentrop sat down at a table in Moscow with an infamous Stalinist named Molotov and cut up Eastern Europe.

The Nazis got Poland. Stalin got the Baltic Republics, including Lithuania. Everybody else got World War II.

In Lithuania, that war never quite ended. Today, Russian tanks again are rolling in Lithuania's streets.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev must order them stopped before his promise of a safer world is crushed beneath their treads.

As you can read across this page, the Russians say they are only trying to keep their nation from breaking apart. Another columnist equates Gorbachev with Abraham Lincoln, a courageous leader holding his country together.

That soap won't wash.

Gorbachev is not Lincoln. Lithuania is not Virginia. And this is not 1860.

Lithuania holds no slaves. It has been enslaved.

The Lithuanians were dragged into the Soviet Union in 1940 and, after 50 years of communism, they want out, just like the rest of Europe.

But Gorbachev, who would have the world believe he is a democrat, says no.

He said no in public pronouncements. It didn't work.

He sent a column of tanks parading in front of Lithuania's Parliament. It didn't work.

He forcibly turned some government offices over to a faction loyal to Moscow. It didn't work.

He let his Army capture and beat Lithuanian deserters bloody. It didn't work.

Now, he's evicting all foreigners. An economist from Harvard who could help Lithuania's economy. A Lithuanian-American from Chicago working for parliament. And hundreds of reporters and diplomats from around the world. Anyone who might report the Russians' next repression.

That won't work, either.

Gorbachev's problem is difficult. If he lets Lithuania leave, other Soviet republics, stretching from Northern Europe to Southern Asia, may follow.

But he must find a compromise. Perhaps a commonwealth of independent states, like the one Britain formed as its empire crumbled. Perhaps something entirely new.

Brutality is no solution — either by Russia against Lithuania, or by Lithuanians against their Russian minority.

If the Russians crush Lithuania, hopes for arms reductions will fade. Gorbachev's plan for resuscitating his nation's moribund economy with western help will die.

We must make that clear, quietly but firmly. Without grandstanding. Without trying to dictate a solution we cannot assure — a course President Bush wisely has followed.

In time, for his own good, Gorbachev must accept reality.

When the Russians rolled tanks into Lithuania in 1940, they claimed to come as allies. The world knew better.

When the tanks rolled again this week, they claimed to come as countrymen. Again, the world knew better.

Gorbachev knows better.

He must stop the tanks. They may crush Lithuania. But they'll also crush Gorbachev and world hope for peace.

QUOTELINES

"Gorbomania has swept away our good sense. If the U.S. backs down now, we will betray our heritage."

— Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y.

"If we want to have our own government, we have to act like an independent country with our own parties and not those of the Soviet Union, the United States or any other country."

— Stanislovas Ilgunas, Lithuanian legislator

"We are waiting for more support because Washington and the United States, they are a state of the great democratic tradition and they would support democracy."

— Vytautas Landsbergis, Lithuanian president

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USA TODAY



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